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Ecology in Action: UNH's New Study Abroad Program Takes Students to New Zealand

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UNH News Bureau

Written by Leah Gladu, UNH Senior

DURHAM, N.H. -- Traditional classrooms were replaced by forests, grasslands, rocky coastlines and subtropical waters, while the indigenous people of New Zealand took over the roles of professors.

This was the setting for 10 university students last fall whose home for 15 weeks was the Haukuri Gulf, an hour southeast of Auckland. They were the first to participate in a new study abroad program offered through the University of New Hampshire's Department of Natural Resources. The program, called EcoQuest New Zealand, offers students an intensive research program of applied field studies in ecology, resource management and environmental policy. (*Continued below photo.*)



Preparing a Feast

University of New Hampshire students in New Zealand as part of the EcoQuest exchange program help prepare a traditional Maori feast. The practice of cooking food underground has been around for a long time, but is not considered common today.

(Photo Courtesy of Anne Hochsprung)

Mimi Becker, UNH on-campus coordinator and faculty advisor, co-founded the program with Bill Brownell, director and UNH alumnus. Becker spent four years planning and implementing the program, because "unless students have the opportunity for intensive hands-on experience in the field, their education is incomplete."

New Zealand offers an ideal context for practical, multi-disciplinary studies, says Becker, due to its rich cultural traditions, diverse ecosystems, expansive natural areas, mild climate, and history of innovative approaches to resource management. According to senior Anne Hochsprung, the experience was both challenging and exhilarating for the inaugural group of students who helped lay the groundwork for one of the university's newest exchange programs.

"We learned a lot about what research is like in the real world," she says, noting that early results were sometimes discouraging and the work could be tiring, but it was all part of the experience. "Nothing works right the first time," she learned.

"On the other hand," Hochsprung adds, "students had the great fortune of being able to work closely with one another, as well as professors and indigenous people of New Zealand due to the high faculty to student ratio."

Though students spent much of their time outside, hiking through beautiful, untouched land, they weren't on vacation. Hochsprung says six days a week were spent learning in a classroom or working outside on different projects.

The EcoQuest New Zealand curriculum consists of four courses: evolution, biodiversity and community ecology; ecosystem management and restoration ecology; environmental policy, planning and economics in New Zealand's political context; and applied directed research on sustainable resource use in the Hauraki

Basin.

Students also work on individual research projects. One project this past year involved helping a local farmer with mussel aquaculture, while others involved tracking rats and their effects on the endangered Kokako bird in the Hunua Range, and researching shorebirds and the impact of humans and cattle on their habitat.

The program, says Becker, is invaluable because "it engages students in learning situations where they are able to interact with and learn from the Maori about their culture, indigenous resource management practices and how Maori's concerns are being addressed under current initiatives."

EcoQuest New Zealand is open to students in all majors and, although admission is open to UNH students first, all qualified students are encouraged to apply.

For more information on UNH's EcoQuest New Zealand Program, call 603-862-2036 or visit the program website at <http://www.ecoquest.unh.edu>.

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